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Issue #1

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Adventures in Science Fiction Terror ISSUE #1

IN THE ENDING

James H. Bearden

pg.#1

BLOCKS OF LANGUAGE

D.F. Lewis

pg.#7

CIRCUS OF FOOLS

Mark Cotterill

pg.#11

MESSIAH COMPLEX

Stephen van Maanen

pg.#16

GRASS LAND

Michael Laimo

pg.#23

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

pg.#32

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THIS PUBLICATION IS INTENDED FOR A MATURE AUDIENCE.

IN THE ENDING

by
James H. Bearden

Space. No stars, no light; a vast, cold, empty nothingness stretching to eternity. Darkness was its comforter, silence its companion.

Through this emptiness sailed a ship, its size incredible. It passed slowly along, or perhaps at a tremendous speed; hard to judge without stars for a backdrop to measure its progress. The bulk of the ship was black as the void it traversed until a series of outer lights switched on. Then came a row of running lights, and within seconds the entire hull was lit, the light reflecting off the huge letters on the side of the ship: *NEW EDEN*.

Machinery hummed into action, and again, within the vessel, lights flickered on after their long programmed silence. Deep in the heart of the ship the living quarters began to run again, the environmental systems spreading the warmth and oxygen outward.

There was a majestic glory to the way the great ship came alive so smoothly after all those long years. The computer ran through its start up programs flawlessly and one after the other all systems came back online. On the bridge, control panels reset themselves and the ship gradually took command of itself again.

Inside a small chamber the deep-sleep modules vibrated to life. Gasses were forced into the chambers and fluids slowly raised as a slight mist *whooshed* into the room. After a few minutes the mist cleared and silence returned.

A faint cough came from one of the modules. Colonel Adam Trent slowly sat up and glanced at his surroundings, blinking his eyes rapidly to bring them into focus. He sat quietly for a few moments, his chest rising and falling with each slow, deep, deliberate breath he drew and then expelled. He eventually began to stretch, loosening stiff muscles, and began to unhook himself from the electrodes and I.V.s. Halfway through the process he paused, puzzled. Something was wrong.

The other module was open but there'd been no movement or sounds. He finished disconnecting himself and crawled from the module, but his legs were not yet strong enough to support him and he sagged to the floor. As he sat on the cold floor waiting for strength and feeling to return to his legs, he realized this wasn't as easy as it had been during the test runs. Leaning heavily against the sleep module he staggered to his feet.

He wore only a sleep suit; basically shorts and a t-shirt with electronic hookups. He was barefoot and the floors were damn cold, but he hobbled across the chamber to the other sleep unit, looked inside and stared directly at a dried husk that had once been Captain Eve Matheson. His mind tried to deny what his eyes reported, and for a long minute he stood staring until his brain finally acknowledged the truth.

The sleep unit had malfunctioned in some way and she had died in her sleep. The condition of the body told him it had happened years before, possibly within minutes of takeoff. How could things have gone wrong in the opening stages of the plan? This would put the project years behind schedule.

Trent limped to the bench beside the wall locker and sat down. After a moment he opened the locker and began to pull on his uniform, still in a daze as he dressed. What would he do now? All their plans had gone right out the window with one fatal mistake.

Mankind's plans.

He glanced to the woman's sleep unit. Her tomb. After witnessing her remains the last thing he wanted to do was to return to deep sleep, but the ships following him were at least five years behind, and he understood resuming deep sleep status to wait for them to arrive from Earth had now become a probable possibility.

When he'd finished dressing he closed her sleep module and walked from the chamber. His legs had begun to respond normally, and turning, he made his way toward the bridge. As he walked he called up the computer. It was able to monitor and respond to his voice from anywhere in the ship. Unless it too had malfunctioned.

"Father, are you online?"

"Yes, Adam."

"Father, tell me what happened to Captain Matheson."

The computer silently processed the command before its cool, synthetic voice answered him. "A collapse of the helo-mastic stabilizer caused a fatal error in Captain Matheson's sleep module, and concurrently, her death."

He entered the trans-riders chamber, stepped aboard a small shuttle, sat down and buckled in. "Bridge." The shuttle sped away through a transverse tube. The ship was huge and complex, overwhelming for only two passengers, but intended as the seed stock for the rebuilding of civilization. The builders envisioned the following colonists using it as building material and components. Of course, they also envisioned Colonel Trent and Captain Matheson establishing a landing zone on the colony world and preparing for their arrival.

"Father, what is our location?" he asked as he sped along. He realized with Eve dead he shouldn't have to preface everything he said with "Father", but the computer would not acknowledge otherwise. Still, it gave him some comfort to use the term, as if he were not speaking to a machine.

"We are nowhere."

"Father, what do you mean *nowhere*?" The trans-rider pulled to a halt in front of a large door marked 01. He unbuckled and stepped out, and the door slid open as he strode through onto the bridge area.

"We are in no known space sector. All reference points are gone."

This was turning into a nightmare. He assured himself Father must be malfunctioning. The ship didn't have a propulsion system capable of sending it beyond the galactic coordinates fed into the computer. Walking to the raised command area, Adam sat down and ran his fingers over the control panel, bringing up the ten observation monitors before him. All returned blank screens, not even the digital distance monitors were working. Or else there was nothing for them to scan.

"Father, are the monitors working correctly?"

The computer whirred softly as it ran a diagnostics program. "Yes."

"Father, how is this possible? Why am I getting nothing on the monitors if they're functioning?" he asked, double checking the equipment.

"There is nothing for the monitors to show."

"*Nothing?* Father, what about the stars, the galaxy?" Adam's pulse quickened.

"Forty-three years after leaving the Earth the entire galaxy vanished."

Too stunned to respond, Adam sat silent for several minutes, his mind trying frantically to make sense of what was happening. How could it be gone? Was Father's data corrupted? But if it were computer malfunction the monitors would still operate properly. There would still be stars. "Father?" he asked finally.

"Yes?" the reply came almost immediately. If Father was shaken by the news it didn't show. Of course, the computer had been given decades to come to grips with things.

"I want you to go back to the beginning of this project and tell me exactly what happened."

"In 2073 the World Government was replaced by the World Church. It was decided to insure the survival of your species that a male and female would be sent to the nearest habitable star system.

This ship was constructed over a period of ten solar years and yourself and Captain Matheson were chosen by lot to crew it. The coincidence of your names, Adam and Eve, was proclaimed proof of Divine Guidance by the Arch Pope."

"Yes, yes, Father, I know all that." At the time Adam had suspected manipulation of the lottery by the Church, but his suspicions were never spoken aloud. Heresy was a serious crime. "I mean after we were put into deep sleep mode. What about the other ships? The other colonists following us?"

"After you were placed in status, the Church changed their position. They proclaimed God had been displeased at the lack of faith shown by the scientific community. Sending multiple ships with additional colonists was to doubt the will of God. It was also expensive. With the depleted resources of the planet already strained by the project, it was deemed better to use them elsewhere."

"Meaning?" No response. He shook his head and amended his question. "Father, meaning?"

"The construction of additional ships were canceled."

He swallowed. "They placed the future of our entire species on two people? Father...Eve and I were the only two they ever sent out?"

"Yes. The Church proclaimed God needed only two the first time, and required only two this time. Some scientists suggested the addition of 'test tube babies' to the ships inventory in the event of an accident, but this was deemed heretic talk. Three scientists were crucified on world wide television for making their suggestions public."

"Lord," Adam sighed, "it really got worse there didn't it?" Father ignored him. Not overly religious himself—no more than was required by law—he had watched the Church suppress counter beliefs one after another. When he was a child the world had been divided by three major religions: Christianity, Buddhism and the True Faith of Allah. The single Christian church controlled nearly ninety percent of the world's nuclear weapons, and when the religious wars began the others were dealt with efficiently and finally, vanishing into a thermonuclear fireball while only managing to cause relatively minor damages to Christian cities with counter-strikes. With itself the lone power on Earth, the One Church was beyond reproach. Only the undeniable depletion of the resources of the planet, and the massive radioactive contamination of large portions of the surface, led it to an alliance with the scientists and the beginning of the Eden Project.

Adam looked around the bridge. Surely this could not be all that

remained. "Father, play back the star patterns beginning with the year of our departure. Use five seconds to the year and note any changes on the screen."

"Complying." The main screen before Adam was suddenly alive with stars, thousands of points of light winking at him. In five-second intervals it shifted, reflecting only the slightest shifts as the point of reference, the moving ship, altered. One minute into play-back a dozen stars on the fringes of the screen were highlighted blue by the computer. On the next interval, they were gone. Adam watched in horror as with each update, stars were highlighted and then removed, the numbers increasing and the section of the screen containing stars shrinking as if the darkness itself were devouring them. Soon only hundreds remained, then dozens. Two minutes and fifteen seconds into play-back the last stars, those in the center of the screen, vanished. Only a black screen remained, but Father continued to diligently update the blank image every five seconds until the digital readout matched the current time frame.

"Father," he said, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. "Explain what happened."

"Insufficient data."

Did the world end like the Bible said it would, Adam wondered? The computer, though built and designed by scientists was programmed to a large degree by data specialists from the Church. "Father, from a Biblical standpoint, best theory you have."

The computer was silent for a few moments and then the far-away voice spoke to him. "Your God has ended it all, and mankind is no more. Your galaxy is no more."

Adam sat staring numbly at the blank monitors. He was alone on a space ship from nowhere, going no place. The ship was equipped with enough supplies to last him several lifetimes, equipped with the supplies necessary to sustain a colony of people building a new world. But there was no new world; no colonists following. He was adrift in the total emptiness of lifeless space...a nightmare dreamed by a madman and told to no one. He would be forever alone, face years of solitude until he finally grew old and died. How could he survive without going insane?...Why would he want to?

Adam left the bridge and wandered the ship, his thoughts drifting from one nightmarish horror to the next. Beyond his galaxy there might be others. It might take thousands of years to reach them, but what was time to someone in his position? He might still make it, he told himself, and perhaps find other beings out there. The Church had

proclaimed there were no other beings beyond Man...but the Church was gone.

He made his way back to the sleep modules and looked down on the thing that was once Eve. He could return to deep sleep and perhaps one day Father would awaken him to a new world and new stars, but could he lay down and sleep without knowing for sure if that day would ever come?

"You were the lucky one," he said to Eve as he shut down the lights and exited the chamber. "I hope you didn't suffer."

The trans-rider carried him back to the bridge.

"Father, are there other galaxies still in existence?"

"Insufficient data. Sensors are not equipped with the range necessary to either confirm or deny."

Adam drew a deep breath, his decision reached. "Father...begin Revelations Sequence."

"Authenticate self-destruct sequence."

"Father, Colonel Adam Trent to verify. Armageddon Protocol. *John 3:16.*"

"Accepted. Self-destruct in five minutes..."

From the console beside the command chair he made a choice of black coffee. In seconds a cup slid out and he savored the smell, strong and steaming. He took a sip and did his best to relax.

"...Four minutes."

He looked around at all of man's great technology surrounding him and smiled sadly. "I'm the last of an arrogant species who thought they knew it all, and in the end, knew nothing."

"Self-destruct in three minutes."

"It began with Adam and ends with Adam...how goddamn appropriate."

"Yes," Father answered. "It is appropriate, Adam."

He smiled at the irony and shook his head. "Father, tell me a story."

The computer obeyed, searching its memory banks in an instant for something relative to the situation.

Adam settled back in his chair and sipped his coffee as Father began to speak.

"In the beginning, there was..."

BLOCKS OF LANGUAGE by D.F. Lewis

The silver inner-sphere, with only one porthole, was not at all claustrophobic. At least, in that endeavor, its designer had been successful. However, the journey which the girl had undertaken between feeder planets was long enough for its real in-built irritations to emerge—such as the amnesia...and the ghosts.

The old-fashioned read-outs on the shipboard computer were cock-eyed, too. "Spoilt the whole ship for a smidgen of tar," the girl mumbled to herself as she struggled with the old-fangled pyjama paper tumbling in reams from between the teeth of the printer. "At least they could have got me something better to print out than this damned daisy-wheel." Her voice took on the tone of frustration, knowing that the intercom was up the shoot and nobody could hear her...except, perhaps, the ghosts.

Tussling with the paper-printed words as they emerged in such profusion from a distant world whose communications were now entirely paperless was, she supposed, worth a chuckle.

And everything was printed out in dyslexic blocks, like Chinese or Sanskrit or Hopi or, even, mirror-written Russian. Philosophy, with which discipline all pilots had to be familiar, had at least taught her that language and reality were so mutually inextricable—and that it was no wonder space-farers, such as herself, even on relatively short hops of a few centuries, were bound to become physically, as well as emotionally, disoriented. Even spiritually. That's why the *Early Uncle* had craftily inserted such a discipline as higher linguistics into a young lady's curriculum, thus allowing her handholds on truth and existence, when the alienations eventually arrived.

She had forgotten her own name. But that did not seem to matter. The ship's cargo was not a live one, thank goodness, and the only relationship she needed to develop was the one with herself. Before this journey (the first one on her own), she had been rather snooty about her own physicality. She could do without men. After taking into account the history of erotic pleasures and bodily fulfilment, she deemed it incredible that there were still the same two sexes in humanity, and both still relatively autonomous.

Her study of various ancient religions taught her much about procreation, nuclear families, simple romance and, above all, the

sensual ingredients later discovered in mathematical logic. Although the two sexes now lived entirely apart, on opposite sides of the Cosmic Chastity Belt, there was a renewal of heterosexuality and folk again yearned for periods of raunchy procreation—even to the point of becoming surreptitious stowaways on cargo ships...

Yet, when the lost-named girl had the chance to couple with a man, she was disgusted. But, worse, the feeling stayed with her...as if he had fallen off inside her. It took three generations of growing up and growing down and growing up again before she could employ the art of self-hypnotized innocence to rid herself of the plugged-up sensation. Now, it was simpler to use her thumb and a good old-fashioned dose of imagination. By the law of mathematical averages and rogue medians, her first solo sphere-trip needed to pass through whole fortune-wheels of triumph and disaster, simply shading off, on occasion, into the less marked realms of good and bad luck and, yes, if Fate thus favored her, mere dreams could summon creatures of both known sexes, together with others of unknown genders, combining unfamiliar, as well as familiar devices for her high and prolonged eroticism.

The day on which the computer broke down was, even so, one of barely sufficient disaster. The girl did, however, simply sit and cry her heart out. It did not matter, really, because it was long since she had been able to comprehend anything that came from the damned contraption. But perhaps the word "disaster" was indeed apt because the last link with civilization had now snapped in two. In truth, however, such disengagement was at least temporarily forgotten, since, with tears streaking her cosmetics into war-paint, she peered at the cabin looking-glass, for company.

Her full-length image did make her feel slightly better...until she realized she would soon be again reaching the optimum age. Why the *Early Uncle* had chosen thirty years old as the pivotal epoch, even the Ancient Books failed to explain. Originally, she had been assured that this journey within the silver sphere was merely to endure five generations at most. But she had already been through six different childhoods. Whether it was the shuddering of the craft or a specific flaw in her own makeup, the latest childhood had been nothing short of dreadful, because her womanly feelings had endured even as far as the age of four. *That* had never been intended by the *Early Uncle*, surely. It was so undignified remembering a different-aged version of the self riding her thumb every night before going to bed with a favorite rag doll.

So, today seemed to be a watershed. She was determined to end herself. The computer failing was the last straw.

Then, there were of course the ghosts: things that appeared at the sphere's single porthole with grisly masks. At first, she thought they were stowaways in fancy dress, intent on some sort of wild party. But, she quickly realized there would be no point in stowing away on this forsaken craft, as each end of the particular journey was populated by those of the same gender only. Yet when she saw the stars shining through the creature's bodies she deemed them ghosts, a phenomenon not unknown in the annals of ancient space travel...

...until she actually heard them tapping on the porthole, and then she had jeered and called them "mirages". She knew that in a desert there were often ice-cool lakes shimmering at the edge of sight; and what was space but a black Sahara of spiritual thirst? Even monsters would be preferable to no company at all.

Weighing each breast in her palm, she continued to stare into the long mirror. But her breasts were too small even at the optimum age of thirty. Pinching between finger and thumb was the best she could manage. She ran her spider hands down, via the midriff, to the briefs, where she playfully tweaked the old-fashioned elastic. She vowed not to assuage the desire, for the longer she could bear such lack of fulfillment, the more intense would be the surge of relief.

Abruptly, she saw reflected over her shoulder the image of a creature. The first time that one of the ghosts had actually managed to penetrate to the spherical living quarters. It was taller than she had imagined it to be, only having previously seen them through the architectural antique of the porthole.

Then another appeared. And another. They shambled over the corrugated metal floor, speaking to each other...not to her. She could not hear them, feeling instinctively that the language they used remained silent to those who did not understand it. She could see that the masks were real faces, though their expressions were fixed. The bodies were upholstered with lumps and coils, as if some innards had been used as cosmetic ornaments...though everything about the creatures remained essentially human-like. Their many hanging tubes and tentacles exuded coal-black sweat, as if their whole *raison d'être* was such production. In her state of sensual brinkmanship she even yearned for such alien appendages to thread her body.

She turned from the mirror to face them. She thrilled to the core, even stirring dormant memories of childhood terrors to break the surface of her mind like silky black otters. But, the creatures had

gone. Or had never been there in the first place. The truth was that they *were* there, but *she* was not there at all...

The computer started churning paper again as the tinkering of the repair mechanic across several light years had at last, by chance, turned the correct groove at the most awkward part of its inner workings...with the longest laser screw-driver in the endless universes.

Sinking further into the curved silvery looking-glass, the girl remembered her name and welcomed back an everlasting childhood which she'd never hope to escape. Her favorite rag doll—in the philosophical way in which such cuddly toys always talked to their child charges—told Alice about the weird parts of Wonderland that Uncle Lewis had left unwritten...or, if written, in a language that nobody understood.

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CIRCUS OF FOOLS

by
Mark Cotterill

I hadn't long to wait now until my turn to enter the ring came. Mentally rehearsing the next few minutes, as much for distraction as preparation, I looked into the mirror and checked my makeup. The bright, colorful facade staring back failed to completely mask my fear. The white powdered face, black eyes and garish red lips painted into a forced grin did not seem to be my own, yet the crowd outside, cheering and hollering, keened my senses for the impending performance nonetheless. Their enthusiasm for the show had not diminished in all the years the Circus had been running; it was more popular now than ever.

The sudden screams of a young man falling from a gantry high above the ring brought me dashing to the side curtain. The loud applause grew stronger as the body hit the ground with a crackling of bones, stirring up the dust as it bounced. The dead man's head at an unnatural angle allowed only a broken neck.

The crowd, roused by the evening's many previous deaths, were now reaching a frenzy. The conclusion of the game was drawing closer with each fatality, and not even the brief interruption of referees and doctors hurrying into the ring to check the lifeless body could diminish their roar. The two remaining players waited as the adjudicator moved in with his black flag and raised it over his head to confirm the kill, and the crowd cheered again as the corpse was removed and the game resumed.

I stepped closer and looked out as the havoc continued. The remaining contestants were running around inside the large caged area of the ring, after each other and away from the huge self-directed machine plodding slowly but deliberately after them.

The robot had been designed and improved over the years, and was equipped with a gruesome array of weapons: spinning blades, scythes, spikes, and claws directed by a computer mind of obvious intent, its blood stained steel body bore testament to its thousands of victims.

Looking at it I couldn't help but be afraid. It closed in on one of the remaining players, a woman who was climbing up onto a railing in an attempt to get clear of the mobile slaughterhouse. Another contestant meanwhile, had dashed along the gallery just above her and was now

trying to push her back down. As the woman reached the top of her climb the other player kicked her hands from the bar, but she managed to grab hold of a lower part of the railing as the robot reached her. With no escape, her screams anticipated the incision into her body of the large circular saw the robot had protracted in front of itself just seconds earlier. Calculating the appropriate height and weight at which to cut, it drove into the middle of her back, using the large blade to slice her heart in half with the precision of a surgeon.

Like all death in the Circus, it was swift. The woman's hands remained on the railing as the section of her body below the shoulders dropped to the ground. The blade withdrew and the various contents of both halves spilled out onto the floor as the crowd voiced their approval and pleasure at the ever more gruesome inventiveness of their hero.

This latest killing had brought the game nearly to its conclusion, with only one other player and myself remaining. I had fought hard to get this far, through other games all equally lethal, but I was not the favorite to win the competition. My opponent had quickly earned a reputation nearly as ruthless as that of the robot. A rage that, like so many of the competitors, had been nurtured by a life filled with tremendous grief. My rival's story was much like my own.

Suffering and pain were now a normal part of life. The death promised by the Circus was nothing when compared to the pain and agony of watching every member of one's family die; each enduring a slightly different torture, but each one slow and hideous. The disease that killed my parents took five days to do its work. Breaking down their muscles first, then eating away at them from the inside and dumping the waste through every exit point in their bodies. For all the medical knowledge accumulated over the past centuries, there was nothing doctors could do for them. Their violent illness was a result of just one of the thousands of super-plagues humanity had been forced to accept.

This collection of powerful diseases had grown out of numerous blunders of the twentieth century. The misapplications of successive generations of medical treatment had bred a legion of adaptive and highly resistant viruses, while ill conceived artificial foods and chemical pollution had all but destroyed the human immune system. The game of evolution humanity had played so well for thousands of years was now being won by the inhabitants of the microscopic world. The super-plagues roamed Earth as we had once done; conquering, destroying, and learning. The Circus was horrific, but society had

become used to death in its many horrendous forms. People could see no future for humanity, so why not go out fighting? A world where death was everywhere was a world where death could be entertainment.

My parents had died quickly compared to my two brothers. Their story was perhaps even more tragic as they were still young and had their entire lives ahead of them. Both had contracted the same illness at the same time; a new and unknown brain wasting disease that gradually stripped away their senses. Finally, nearly a year later, when they died within a few days of each other, I decided I had to join the Circus before the next one came along and my luck ran out. I had no one left to care whether I lived or died anyway.

The attendants finished clearing away the young woman's body and the game was underway again. The robot was back in the ring and the crowd was eager for more blood. The starting signal activated the huge machine and it lumbered toward me while my opponent ran in the opposite direction, certain I would not survive the encounter.

The robot was no more than an obedient idiot. It had sophisticated sensing and targeting equipment and pattern recognition programs capable of intercepting a fleeing victim, but it always attacked the nearest target first.

There was no escaping the machine, the only uncertainty now was how I would die. I backed up, unwilling to passively accept my fate, and was soon at the fence surrounding the ring. Some of the people in the crowd rose from their seats and began jeering and beating on the wire mesh.

The robot consulted its experience database and calculated the most effective way to dispose of me. As soon as it had done this a small tube appeared out of its left side. My experience told me what was about to happen and I jumped out of the way at the last possible moment. The mob of twenty or so who had detached from the rest of the audience and had gotten themselves pushed up against the fence suddenly served as a more viable target than I was, and the burning napalm that shot from the tube hit them with flawless accuracy.

The blazing gel covered the fence, floor and first five rows of the audience, but their screams of pain were quickly muffled as the napalm went to work, turning its victims into a pile of charred meat. The fire crews prevented a spread of fire while the game continued.

No contestants had been killed...the robot remained active.

I took my chance and ran. The robot turned, disregarding the massacre it had created. My opponent ahead of me was also running.

I focused my attention on him; he was all that stood between me and my prize. I had beaten the odds to make it this far, all I had to do now was survive beyond the average life expectancy. When it was over all this death and destruction amounted to only one thing: the prize of all prizes.

Whoever emerged at the end of the contest received the ultimate reward. A cure for everything. A life unknown to the millions of Earth's population in decline, both socially and numerically, life with any real prospect of endurance was something few people had, and there was only one group of people with the power to give it. The same sciences that had brought us the pandemics and the super-plagues had created cell regeneration treatments, viral immunity and a host of other panaceas, but the treatments were far beyond the means of any ordinary person. Fearful that a breed of elite might be somehow created, the World Government had introduced the Circus. It had become a kind of screening process of sorts, and as barbaric as the Circus seemed, it did serve a purpose. If I was to get this ultimate prize, my opponent would have to die.

The robot was hot on my trail again so I decided to follow my opponent. He'd reached one of four crossings, a short passageway connecting the area we were in with another, a brief sanctuary from the robot, which would be forced to take another route to reach us. The passage, like everything else in the Circus, was designed to offer only the most difficult of transits. Acid sprayers had been installed along both sides of the passageway and a heavy iron gate stood at the far end. Periodically, and at purely random intervals, the sprayers would fill the length of the passage with a deadly mist of industrial-grade acid. The gate, by contrast, rose and fell with mechanical regularity. Success at passing through to the other side depended equally on luck and skill.

I understood my opponent's gambit. If he reached the other side it would buy him at least a minute, ample time for the robot to deal with me if I stayed behind, but if I followed I might not make it through. He was forcing me to take a route I didn't want to take. He approached the entrance to the passageway and stopped, desperately trying to judge the timing of his run, but I kept on towards him.

The gate rose, the acid jets sprayed, he waited. I looked at the open gate and slowed my pace. The acid jets stopped and the gate dropped. My opponent hesitated, and as I bolted into the passageway, the gate slammed to the ground with a resounding thud. My fate was sealed. My opponent looked back and saw the robot approaching, drawing

closer. I reached the gate just as it was rising and heard the clatter on the steel deck-plates that covered the trench below as my opponent followed me in. The gate reached its apex, a couple of centimeters more and the ratchet release would send it down to the ground again. I threw myself into the gap just in time, just as my opponent arrived. But he was a split second too late. Making a desperate attempt to stop its descent with his arm, the heavy gate shattered the bone like dead wood. In a moment it didn't matter. Predictably, the acid sprayed out onto his writhing body and melted into him, his entire form disintegrating before my eyes, his flesh, bone and muscles breaking down into a mushy pulp that slithered in lumps through the gaps of the grille below him. The acid pool beneath hissed as the final remains sank out of sight and into obscurity.

I hadn't noticed the cheer of the crowd, but the deafening cries accompanying my victory woke me to the realization that I had actually won.

Even while I was paraded around the ring, still wearing what remained of my torn costume and sweat-slick makeup, I hardly dared to believe it was true.

The formalities of victory seemed agonizingly slow, but eventually I was led away. The crowd cheered me all the way out of the tent to the large air-car waiting to sweep me away to some secret location.

The journey took about an hour. We flew over the sparsely populated west coast. I watched the coastline fade into the distance, and, alone in the luxurious cabin, I dozed comfortably as the air-car coasted into the night.

I was awakened by a jolt as the car landed on unknown ground. I could see the shapes of a building outside, illuminated by the rising sun. It was some kind of dome, perhaps a tent. The door opened and revealed it to me.

I wondered what was happening, but realization came quickly. My dream hadn't come true, my hope had been false. My reward was nothing more than another day at the Circus.

Another Circus in another city, but the Circus nonetheless.

With a deep breath, I stepped from the air-car, ignoring the cheers of the nearby crowd echoing along the runway, and moved slowly toward the ring.

MESSIAH COMPLEX

by
Stephen van Maanen

The steady traffic of ladies flowing in and out of my friend's apartment was a constant distraction. Still, the music pulsing gently from the quadrio allowed me to focus on my work even as their tender lips made soft utterances, promising me many hours of possible, pleasurable distractions if I'd just take the time to acknowledge their presence. I knew exactly how much stock to put into these offers, so before their words even reached my conscious mind, the subconscious routines learned through many hours of real time experience intercepted and diffused them, leaving behind only a subtle feeling of annoyance as might be experienced in the instinctual swatting away of persistent, hungry insects.

"Coffee?" my friend asked, his voice penetrating my defensive screens. Acknowledging with a quick snap of my hand that could have meant anything but would soon have me in possession of yet another steaming mason jar full of the deadly brew, I remained focused. My concentration never wavering, I continued to use his antiquated keyboard to place one character after another, the voice-activated system having recently been rendered useless to me.

Part of me registered the buzz-like comment, "My God, you type fast!" through some level of lower function which quite suited the description of the spectator. Still, my fingers flew like lightning through the unfamiliar territory as word after word piled onto the screen, somehow forming coherent sentences and allowing me an outlet for my emotions.

Surprisingly enough, it was the loud ring of the telephone that nearly proved successful in snapping me out of my mindset. Due to old habits my hand went as far as the handset before I realized the futility of my actions and let the answering machine pick it up. The stern voice of some anonymous bill collector threatening a wide array of evil actions was enough for me to refocus my rage into a cold hard ball while I continued my work.

"You stupid bitch!" accompanied by a loud crash that likely meant my coffee was no longer on the way somehow seemed to fit with the Baroque style synthesis spewing from the speakers. "All right, everybody just get the hell out!" Despite James's tantrum and booming voice the steady clicking of the keyboard wavered not.

"Davie," a soft voice whined in my ear, "that doesn't mean I have to

go too, does it? I'm here for you, tell him."

Aw, for fuck's sake! I jumped to my feet. Of course these words were unable to leave my useless vocal cords but I made my point by smashing a hole through the dry wall with my fist and kicking my chair halfway across the room. The inevitable scurrying and cursing that followed left in its wake a most wonderful sense of calm, punctuated by the slamming of the door. I dropped myself onto the couch and before long James appeared bearing gifts from Juan Valdez. He pulled out his ancient Zippo, sparked up two Camels and passed one my way before propping down beside me.

James had been a great help since the surgery had robbed me of both my voice and career. I assume it was the surgery and not the bullet that had torn through my throat, as I distinctly remember screaming when it happened. I had accepted that turn of events as best I could, but then, I'd never really had much choice.

We looked at each other and rolled our eyes in unison as the telephone once again began to ring. James shut the ringer off and turned down the volume on the machine so we couldn't hear who it was. We really didn't care; it was either bill collectors or silly women who had convinced themselves they liked us regardless of how we behaved. We couldn't afford one of the fancy *vid-phone* units and we liked it that way.

All in all life wasn't too bad even considering my recent disability. Oh, how life can twist and turn. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was always one of those fanatics. You know the type, save the seals, stop abortion, right injustice wherever I found it. Life was precious to me. *All* life. Our peaceful demonstration outside a clinic was no different than the hundreds I'd attended before. Since the gun ban these events were usually peaceful, but some moron in the crowd pulled a homemade zip gun. Shots were fired, I got hit. End of story.

I stood up and replaced my chair at the computer. Closing the word processor I'd been using to write my latest article on how fucked up our world was, I switched to the Internet Telebroadcast to catch up on the news.

"...and again, our latest breaking story. Immortality now appears to be a reality! Eternity in your twenties. Phartech Enterprises has developed a treatment that can allegedly cure old age and rejuvenate dead cells. In three months you can reportedly return to your youthful body of yesteryear." The usual idiotic videos showing before and after photographs followed. A man in his early eighties at the start of his treatment had become an unrecognizable man of twenty-two. Next

purpose came the transformation I so desperately needed. I was suddenly so focused I barely heard James sending our visitor on her way. He knew me well enough to recognize my posture, and left me undisturbed while also seeing to it that I had a constant supply of cigarettes and fresh coffee. I think it was somewhere in the middle of the third pot I hit the jackpot.

"No, my name is James...No, you don't know me. Listen, I was told to say to you the words, 'Grendel Syndrome'."

Russell Reiger was likely not feeling very comfortable right at that moment. This was his biggest success to date, and with those words he had to know the life he had so painstakingly built could be stolen from him, his greatest triumph crushed under the weight of an earlier mistake. Reiger was one of the scientists responsible for the creation of the "Youth Drug", as it was now being called, but had begun his service with Phartech only five years earlier, after a promising military career had been abruptly ended—by me. His work in creating genetically altered super-soldiers had, at first, seemed quite promising. It was only when the seven hundred and thirty-six "volunteers" he had arbitrarily chosen began to rot away while simultaneously developing a craving for the taste of human flesh that he admitted he may have made a slight "miscalculation". That fiasco resulted in the deaths of over eleven hundred people, and to cover his tracks the military "declared war" on a small Arabic nation. Just over eleven hundred "casualties" resulted. Very few civilians had ever heard of the "Grendel Syndrome"...but I was one of them.

James held the syringe of life so graciously supplied to us by our mass murdering friend. The needle contained the blood of our new pet gerbil, Sphinx. Sphinx didn't mind, we hadn't hurt him and had after all, rescued him from a life of eternity in the devious hands of Phartech lab technicians. "You first," James said softly.

I gave a slow nod, and as the needle pierced my vein I remembered what Reiger had said. *This is the last time I ever want to hear from you. I know you could have destroyed me years ago but that debt is now paid in full, understand? This virus is transferable; it can be spread via blood or through sexual contact. It doesn't take three months for the treatment to work, that's Phartech bullshit. They'll take you, treat you, and then chemically ensure that you're unable to pass it on before they release you. You guys are both so young you probably won't notice any change in yourselves. This gerbil you have here contains the virus. Once you are infected you'll be*

contagious for the rest of your lives, which, barring accident or illness, should be a very long time.

I hadn't been too impressed with the way he'd said, "accident", but I figured he was just trying to emphasize the fact that I shouldn't bother him again. I had my ass covered and he knew it. He'd dealt with me before.

James's turn came and he didn't even hesitate. I think he went along with the injection more out of a feeling of bonding between us than any need for immediate immortality. As if our friendship could get any stronger. He was now almost a part of me, my voice when I needed one. We were sharing a twenty million dollar experience, and without either one having to indicate to the other, we laughed in unison at the private joke life had just bestowed upon us. The private joke that had given us *life*.

I think James's reasons for being so very sexually active differed greatly from my own. The jar of condoms on his dresser was being rapidly depleted whereas my own jar never moved. Oh, the power we had! The power I used. With every new conquest I spread the gift of life, the gift of youth, and I reveled in it. Life for all! In my own private way, never telling anyone of the secret gift, I was permitted to play God, to create my own world. I was making a difference, a greater difference than all my previous insignificant efforts had ever accomplished. The months slipped by, marked only by a different face, a different name sharing my bed nearly every night. Everyday a new love, a new body to be blessed by my potency.

The only downside was I rarely saw James. That isn't to say we never saw each other, just that he'd become such a part of me before this and somehow that had changed. My life had become so wrapped up in my pursuit that I never thought of much else, never had time for anything else. So, it was with great pleasure, that one unusual morning as I sat in front of the computer, I saw James enter the room with two steaming jars of coffee. Sparking up two cigarettes, he handed me one and motioned for me to join him on the couch. I did, and we sat smoking in silence for what seemed a long time.

It was so much like the old times I expected the phone to ring at any moment. A feeling of nostalgia filled me so fully I almost started to cry. I scrunched my face into a wondrous smile and looked at my friend, only to notice he wasn't smiling back.

"Man, what are you doing?" he asked in a nearly stern tone. Knowing I couldn't answer he looked away, staring out the window and ever so slightly shaking his head. "This isn't right, what we're

doing—it just isn't right. Haven't you thought about it? The implications? I thought I knew you, man, you're Mr. Pro-Lifer. I never even suspected you'd do something like this. You got to think, man. Think!"

I knew he'd have to catch on sooner or later, James was far from stupid. Nevertheless, I was still stunned at being chastised when the phone rang, further destroying the peace that had existed only moments before. We looked at each other as we always had before, but this time it was different; this time there was distance, playful laughter replaced by held-back tears.

"Dave," he said, "how do you know these people even want youth? You never even gave them a choice—never a chance to decide for themselves. Society needs time to adjust to this. Think of the future, the overpopulation and all the problems it brings. *You*, the visionary. Jesus, man, how many children will you have fathered? How many abortions will you have caused?" The answering machine finally picked up, and we sat there as we had a thousand times before, and listened to see who was calling. This once familiar and joyful pause now tainted, a reminder of carefree days and closeness now more painful even than being lectured by James. I felt my world crashing down around me with an infinitely more powerful effect than I had experienced even after losing my voice.

"Ummmm," a female voice said tentatively, "hey, guys...I don't even think you remember me. This is Sheila, and I spent the night there with you once...Well, I...ah...I was just at the doctor..."

I looked at James, and then propping my head with my left hand, closed my eyes. I was pretty sure I knew what was coming and I really didn't want to hear it. I didn't think I could take much more this morning, but James was right, I'd have to accept responsibility for my actions. I only prayed she hadn't already had an abortion.

The word "AIDS" followed by the beep made me realize I hadn't been listening. I felt, more than heard, James leave the room, and as I turned to call out after him, I knew—I just knew—this time my voice was gone forever.

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GRASS LAND by Michael Laimo

Solar ship #645b burned through the planet's atmosphere and crashed down upon the surface. Two of its occupants emerged from the brains of the craft—the third lay sprawled in a pool of blood somewhere in the hull. They walked a short distance and viewed the place they had ended up.

"Air's good," Finney said, taking a reading on the environmental cipher-byt modified into the forearm of his atmospheric immunity suit.

The two men removed their helmets and sucked in long hard breaths. Not much more could be said about the place other than what they could plainly see.

Grass. An endless sea of green, disappearing into the horizon. No hills, no bumps or valleys or even a patch of soil, just trillions of thick blades grouped together to form a carpet of inch-high grass. And that was all.

Shiny beams from the twin-suns cast shimmers of illumination across the abundance of green, and Finney, staring hard, began to see movement along the tranquil surface—bright forms oscillating over the supple patches of dew.

"Damn eerie," Drew said.

"No shit," Finney turned and looked at the #645b, its starboard half curled against the planet surface, tatters of green encircling the point of contact. A small fire burned in an empty fuel reservoir exposed from the damage.

"Should we check on Matthews again?" Drew asked, wiping a film of dirty sweat from his brow.

"He's dead," Finney said, shaking his head, eyes roaming the thick blades of grass. The sight made him sick, and he wanted to throw up, but was afraid his vomit might remind him a bit too much of how Matthews now looked. He waited for Drew to say something that might be of value to them, something they could accomplish to get them out of this sudden mess, but the moment between them remained silent, Finney's sights tracing the reflections of sunlight meandering about the skin of the land as Drew did much the same. Eventually Drew spoke—yelled actually—his arms spread in question. "So what the hell do we do now? Huh?"

Finney stepped forward, eyes racing over the stillness of the grass,

suit crinkling as he moved. "This is big, man." Finney had spent years in space, and had been frightened before, but this was the big one: unprecedented fear too extensive to behold. "It could go on forever."

"Did you do a terra-scan before we came down?" Fear rode Drew's voice, and Finney had strong feelings that Drew's dismay was a stronger reflection of his own dread. He hoped Drew didn't go into shock, which would be quite easy for either of them in this situation. If he did, Finney knew he'd have to sedate him.

"Hub?" Finney finally answered. He'd heard Drew but couldn't deal with the fact that he'd failed them; hadn't done his job correctly. Hell, they'd been crashing, he never expected to make it. No one would've been able to handle their duty with death so close.

"A scan!" Drew snapped. "Topography! Hills, lakes, mountains, anything else other than this fucking grass? Any idea which way to go? Probably not because you didn't scan the fucking planet!" He slammed his helmet to the ground and watched it bounce away, leaving tiny impressions in the grass.

"Ain't nothing else here, asshole," Finney said. "Just one big motherfucking walk in the park."

"What about water? We supposed to suck dew the rest of our lives?"

Finney fell silent, battling his urge to join Drew's hysteria; the ship was beyond repair and they had few rations. As Drew stalked away, kicking angrily at the grass, Finney moved around the tail of the #645b and inspected the area. He could feel his feet slipping in the dew-like substance coating the grass, and when he looked down he noticed it wasn't simply dew after all, but something gelatinous, and probably undrinkable. He glanced skyward. Not a single cloud.

After a short while Drew found Finney and stood next to him. Both men stared at the seemingly infinite grass, and then the sky, and then the ship, their sights and thoughts revolving through a vicious circle of sorts, no answers within grasp. Finney could feel a tremor in the grass, and in his imagination he saw the inch-thick blades cutting through his boots, grasping his ankles and pulling him down, down...down. He remembered being a child and stepping barefoot through the grass at Lakeside Park, chasing a Frisbee his father had tossed over his head. Then, it had been fun. Now, the thought of running his toes through this stuff terrified him.

Without speaking he stepped away from Drew, back toward the ship, taking kicks at the grass, trying to leave indentations in its perfectly balanced slope.

"What are you doing?" Drew called. For the first time since the crash he sounded relatively calm.

"I going to send out a signal. The QS-3 had our trajectory mapped. Sooner or later somebody aboard will pick it up." Finney stepped back around the ship and stooped through the cabinway. He felt better immediately, despite the melding aromas of scorched wires, pungent gas and Matthews' coppery blood. It felt good to not have to look at that grass. It didn't matter how green it was or how fresh it smelled or how smooth it felt—it wasn't right. No matter how you looked at it, it was too...*perfect*.

He climbed into the rear assembly cabin, took the ladder there to the aft crawlspace at the top of the ship and located the radio lying in a tangle of wires.

Dead.

"What took you so long?" Drew asked.

Finney exited the ship, nearly panting. It had been a real struggle fixing the damn thing, but he'd managed to reconnect its damaged wires despite the poor lighting and lack of necessary tools. He staggered toward Drew, who now sat in the grass, staring. Nearly four hours had gone by and both suns had shifted, one directly above them, the other down the horizon, forty-five degrees from the first. Drew had a film of sweat glossing his face, drops of it racing down his suit. "I fixed the radio. It's sending out a high-frequency signal right now. Should reach the QS-3 in a day."

"The ground," Drew said, ignoring him. "It's vibrating."

If he hadn't felt it earlier, Finney would've assumed Drew had come down with a nasty case of the willies. And now, he felt it once again, stronger than before. He couldn't blame it on dementia. They *both* felt it.

Finney saw the green blades caressing Drew's buttocks as he moved, and he noticed something else, too. The grass had grown. He wondered how long all this grass had been here. Years? Millennia? Now with the possibility of it growing, he speculated other questions. *Is this never-ending sea of grass the only life here? Is it intelligent? And goddamn...does anyone tend to it?* He swallowed. These questions would have to remain unanswered for now, he didn't have the fortitude to postulate any logistics. He could only continue to do what he did best: stare out across the peaceful sea, this ultimate stretch of green. It lay as quiet and peaceful as a sleeping infant, and yet so formidable, its threat to suddenly break the silence as impending as

BURNING SKY, Adventures in Science Fiction Terror

the shrilling wails from a baby startled from a nightmare.

Drew stood and stretched. Finney saw the grass hiding his ankles.
"It's growing, Drew."

Drew nodded, either blindly or in agreement. Even as they walked back to the ship, Finney couldn't be sure which.

The suns began to set, each in its own horizon.

Finney had spent a good deal of time bottling the ship's supply of water, which wasn't much. A week's worth if they only took a sip or two with each meal, which was what he'd done to wash down the powdered vegetables he'd eaten. Afterwards he went into Drew's cabin and found him lapping the water that dripped from the ship's air purification system. "I'm thirsty," he said, smiling.

Finney nodded and gave him a mouthful of water from one of the bottles, then stored the remaining bottles into two airtight lockbins located at the top of the vestibule segregating their cabins.

"I'm scared, Fin."

Finney nodded, noticing the greenish stains and bits of grass clinging to Drew's suit. "It's getting to me too," he replied, concerned. Drew might be a bit too far along on the "losing it" scale. He walked outside and Drew followed. The suns quickly pulled the last of their light behind the horizon. In front of them, thirty miles of rustling grass.

"Christ, look at it. It's moving." Drew stepped down. The grass now reached his calves. "I can feel it. Man, it's so high now. And the vibrations, they're stronger. I think it's...it's alive. Fin, it's *alive*."

He looks and sounds like a madman, Finney thought. But sure as hell, Finney had felt it too, and now he could feel it through the steel platform of the #645B's access ramp. He gazed out at the plain. Damn if it didn't look as though all those blades were moving, bustling like a crowd anxiously awaiting a band to hit the stage.

Drew spun in nutty circles. "Yes! I feel it! It's alive! So graceful and warm and inviting! I can *smell* it!"

Suddenly Finney had never been more afraid in his entire life. "You're crazy, Drew," he muttered, then turned and headed back into the ship.

Finney awakened and knew Drew had stayed out in the grass all night. He sipped some water and ate a meal of dried eggs and bacon, then checked the radio and searched for a stronger signal—a nearby ship, perhaps—but found nothing.

The smell of Matthews' decaying had filtered through the entire ship now, and it was enough to force Finney out. On his way he noticed a few blades of grass that had somehow found their way up through the vents in the ship's flooring. He could also feel the vibration. The whole ship was shaking.

He stepped outside, felt his skin crawl. The grass had grown so much that if he had had the balls to walk out into it, it would have reached his waist. A morning wind sprung up, rustling the three-foot blades. Ten feet ahead he caught sight of Drew's suit sprawled amidst the green. "Drew!...Drew, get up!" When no answer came he knew he had no choice but to go out into the grass. He moved forward, legs sifting through the growth. It hugged his body as he waded forward, and felt as if it might wrestle him down at any moment. Chest heaving, Finney reached the suit. It was stained with patches of green but he grabbed it at any way.

Empty.

He looked around. The grass resembled a monstrous wheat field. The twin suns beat down on it, the dewy moisture from the day before long dried up.

A hundred yards ahead, Drew approached in an aimless meander.

His face and shoulders were bloodless, his torso bare and bleak. His muscles hung lifelessly beneath his naked, wilting skin, and a beard had begun to grow on his face, the stubble gray, mossing his sallow cheeks. Strands of hair hung lifelessly over his brow, his eyes pecking through, studying the still growing grass. And then Finney saw the green, patches of it mottling Drew's skin, as if it had begun a transition into something ecological. "Drew..." Finney searched for the right word. "Something...something's wrong with you."

Drew said nothing, running his fingers through the grass. An empty wind shook the stalks and Finney noticed clumps of green collecting in the creases of Drew's face. Drew then smiled and said, "It's talking to me. Listen...can you hear it?"

Finney heard it. Felt it too. The vibration had taken on a new quality, something almost audible. It was stronger. Closer. Like a song from a siren tempting them to stay a while longer.

"You hear it, don't you, Fin?"

Finney nodded. He heard it all right, he just didn't know what the fuck it was. Drew's mouth gaped open like a hole in a rotting piece of fruit. Finney closed his eyes for a moment, wishing away the pain. When he opened them Drew had curled himself up at the roots of the grass, head and palms to the ground. Finney thought better of it, but

then his sense of reason divorced his mind and he sat down next to Drew, listening to the vibration that sang even louder, becoming something entirely different. No longer a vibration really, but a...a *crunching* sound. Like something...*alive*.

The wind ceased to exist in this grass, and minutes later, when Finney finally stood up, it had grown at an alarming rate, the tips of the stalks now flirting with his chest. He tried to tear Drew from the ground, away from the mindless communication with the planetary resonance, but he failed, the grass seemingly fighting him away as if Drew were its prey. Finney had no choice but to leave the naked man behind.

In a sudden panic he battled his way back to the ship, muscles straining to press away the blockage. The wind howled in a gust, whipping stalks into his face as the tremors grew in volume, blossoming into a chorus of terrible noises that owned Drew and had Finney so terrified, its innermost syncopation

...crunch...crunch...crunch

encroaching upon him, shaking the ground and the ship.

Finney reached the platform. So loudly the noise loomed here, above the apex of the grass, the sounds of screams and hollers splitting the winds, shifting the environment, unhinging all the silence from its present existence in this world of green pastures. Finney cocked an ear to the sky and heard something else within the noise.

Something mechanical.

Something *intelligent*.

He grasped the iron rungs at the face of the ship and started to climb, turning briefly to see Drew dancing in insane circles amidst the grass. Only his ruffled hair appeared, the very top of his head bouncing about like a beach ball. Finney thought back to when they had first touched down not thirty-six hours before. The grass then had been short, like a crewcut on a Marine's head.

Now it drowned Drew.

He reached the top of the ship and was soon on his feet, but the thunderous vibration had become chopping, nearly tearing his body in half.

He looked out, squinting. There was something in the distance, but he really couldn't yet understand what it was. To Finney it seemed to defy logic, and it immediately occurred to him that he would fail miserably should he attempt to make sense of the figure before him.

At first it appeared there could only be one of the entity, a monster of a thing the width of a basketball court and two stories high. He

watched as it surged over the horizon, leaving cut swaths behind it.

Its mouth fell open. "It's cutting the grass."

No—it was *eating* it.

But then it came closer and Finney could make out two beings, one riding atop the other, seemingly driving it. The elevated monster looked like a giant earthworm, its alien face lurking atop a segmented tubular body, bulbous eyes lolling, mouth twitching and lined with gnashing teeth, contorting and changing its expressions from one form of wrath to another. A dozen centipede-like appendages emerged from various places in its writhing torso, each one gripping a series of cables and chains that linked to various locations along the underbelly of the creature.

The lower half of the pairing looked like a malformed turtle. It appeared robotic at first, plates of rust and metal overlapping its back like great scales. But a second glance confirmed *some* biological features: patches of hair sprouting all over its enormous body, brown woolly tufts whipping wildly in the drafts it produced as it traveled. In certain places patches of blackened hide escaped its armor like swollen rubber squeezing through the shell of a tire.

Its various eyes glowed red like lasers, fluent beams firing out and tracing the landscape before it. A dozen mouths—huge cave-like circles filled with hundreds of metallic teeth—wolfed at the grass in a feeding frenzy. It was an amazing sight, giant plowfields of shaved grass falling behind the wicked pairing in a shower of shearings, a glistening coat of mucous-like matter spraying out from a gaping orifice at the rear of the dormant creature, coating the landscape like smears of Vaseline on dry skin.

Finney could only stare, a million emotions tearing through him, rooting him. It was only after another monster appeared further on down the horizon that he found the strength to flee.

He scampered down the side of the ship, onto the platform and into the grass which now stood at least six inches above his head. He ran as hard as he could, away from the ship, Drew's insane laughter a million miles away, nearly smothered by the deafening grating sounds of the mowing creatures and the all-encompassing growth.

Grass whipped by, slicing into his face, its thickness strangling him. He gasped for air, his muscles screaming with pain, and it was then he began to welcome the possibility of death.

In the distance hard an incredible explosion: the ship, meeting its fate at the jaws of the mowers.

And soon thereafter, the horrifying shrieks of Drew being eaten alive.

Finney kept running, instinct driving his legs. His mind told him to stop being foolish, to give up the hope that he might be able to outpace these monstrous things; that even if he did escape he'd have to pray that the damn signal he'd sent had been located, interpreted. Otherwise his chances of survival would be severely limited in this land of grass and mutant mowers.

The ground shook with madness. The mower-worms were getting closer. Like a snake's sudden strike, a great howl swooped in from above, blocking out the sun. Finney stopped, turned his gaze skyward. A great shadow hung over him.

Hearing the mowers approach, his mind told him that death would soon be coming, either from land or from above; that here in the sky was another of this planet's inhabitants, another androidal creature, this one the first to pinpoint his location.

Turbulent winds whipped the grass around him and the ground shook violently. Finney fell and waited for death to take him.

Until something brushed his shoulder.

He spun his neck, looked. A black rope ladder met his gaze, rising up to the ship. He grabbed hold of it and the ship took off just seconds before one of the mower creatures disintegrated the spot where he had just been.

He peered up through tearing eyes, saw the lettering QS-3 on the hull of the ship. Earthen. They had gotten his signal! He was saved.

Finney gazed over the landscape as the ship carried him away. He saw the second creature just to the left of the first, eating the grass. Behind it, now visible over the horizon, he beheld the rest of them.

Hundreds of thousands more, an entire army of grass-eating beasts, blanketing the curve of the grass land like a troop of army ants carrying bits of leaves to a mound.

He gripped the ladder tightly, closed his eyes and prayed away the horrible images of giant worms and turtle-like robots, keeping his sights shuttered until he'd been safely shuttled into the confines of the QS-3.

When Finney opened his eyes the crew of the QS-3 was waiting for him.

Dead and piled in pieces.

A door slid open in the wall next to the heap of crew members. A worm beast slithered forth, its multitude of limbs swaying wildly.

Finney froze.

And the worm-beast smiled rows of green-stained, razor sharp teeth—a moment before it thrust on him.

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